



# THE FOUR SEASONS SYMBOL IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY, VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT

The symbol of the four seasons in the art of the Nguyen Dynasty was shown on several different materials and played a huge role in the decorative arts, thereby transforming patterns in the most appropriate way and many other symbolic meanings, bearing the imprint of contemporary art. There lies a large amount of aesthetic aspects of life, even sometimes it has the evocations, prediction of aspirations in the relationship between people and reality and society.

**KEYWORDS:** Art, Nguyen Dynasty, Decorative, Symbol, Four Seasons.

## 1. THE FOUR SEASONS SYMBOL IN THE ART OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY:

Many studies have confirmed that the fine art of the Nguyen Dynasty has its own style with many unique artistic values, in which decorative art has developed strongly, had a massive scale, and is diverse in materials, themes, symbolic meanings etc., in which the four season symbols have many vivid styles, different symbolic meanings with unique symbols of the visual arts of the Nguyen Dynasty as one of the typical artistic values.

In the work of 'L'Art à Hué (Mỹ thuật ở Huế) (Cadière, 1919), Priest L. Cadière explained and evaluated the decorative arts of Hue, the spiritual expression in royal decoration in general and mentioned many four seasons images through materials. Whereby, the materials such as: red lacquer with gilding, fresco, reliefs, stone carving, wood carving, mosaic, etc. when they are analyzed, commented and compared with some characteristics, in addition to the four season image, there are groups of "four friends" or "four seasons" consisting of the apricot tree (spring), the lotus (summer), the chrysanthemum (autumn) and the pine tree (winter).

In general, the four seasons, a decorative style, is very rich and diverse on architectural works of the Nguyen dynasty. This style is symbolic and highly generalized of Eastern philosophical thinking, at the same time, it also expresses the ideas, human outlook on life in this period through some symbols:

First of all, they are flowers which have the meaning of the crystallization of the beauty of plants and are attractive to people, therefore, the flower topic has been paid much attention and shown in the decorative arts.

+ Apricot - the flower representing the spring, is on the top of the hundred flowers that are "courteous with the essence" that the ancients never ceased to praise. Apricot is considered one of the "three friends in the miserable years" including pine tree, bamboo, and apricot symbolizing the noble mankindness, always keeping the sense of purpose and uprightness of gentlemen, according to the concept of the ancients. Because on a winter day, while other trees lose their leaves, the apricot still blooms, especially, the apricot flower blooms before all other flowers do at the end of December and the beginning of January of the lunar calendar, so the ancients called the list of the names of the top winners in the Hoi exam (in the spring) the Apricot board.

+ Orchid - a flower associated with purity and longevity.

+ Lotus - the flower representing the summer, is a symbol of purity, born in the mud and then rises to give off its fragrance. Lotus are often combined with other symbols such as: Lotus combined with duck (inter - pressure), symbol of attachment and harmony; Lotus combines with the carp and the Hill Myna, all mean luck, fortune, etc.

+ Chrysanthemum - representing the autumn, is the symbol of the master who keeps his moral integrity despite the circumstances.

+ Peach blossom - a powerful flower, expelling evil spirits, so the peach blossom is often used during Tet, symbolizing the spring.

+ Peony - a "wealth and high-placed flower", is the lord of flowers. This is a

flower symbolizing a noble woman, wealth, joy, and happiness.

+ Bamboo - representing the winter, has upright branches. The winter is cold while leaves of other trees are dry, those of the bamboo are still fresh, bamboo node is called "tie" so the ancients used the bamboo to represent the sense of purpose and uprightness of gentleman.

+ Pine tree - like bamboo, the kind of tree is still green in the winter, lives in dry, sunny, and rocky places. The pine tree represents the figure and appearance of a gentleman who is always calm even though the life is swirling or difficult, associates with the soldier's desire to live and be a human being in a strong and courageous way.

Thus, the ancients used four species of trees representing the four seasons with deep philosophical meanings, especially in decorative arts. However, folk artists do not often show herbs alone, they are always paired with an animal to create vivid images. Four seasons often has themes such as: Apricot - bird (Bird perches on apricot branch); Lotus - duck (duck swims by the lotus); Chrysanthemum - Butterfly (butterfly with chrysanthemum); Pine tree - crane or Pine tree - deer (a crane or a deer standing under a pine tree), etc. It can be said that the four seasons is a very common topic in the traditional decorative arts, especially in the fine arts of the Nguyen dynasty, is mainly expressed in a gentle realistic style with an expressive style creating images imbued with the national identities. In addition, fruits are also included in the decoration, adding vibrancy to the four season decorative arts, such as: Pear - representing friendship; Peach - representing longevity; Finger citron - representing abundance and crowding; Grape - representing happiness and wealth; Gourd - representing the crowd, affluence...

The four seasons image, one of the structural elements forming the value of art works reflects on nature is often drawn, carved, engraved on architecture objects/building components with decorative patterns of variety of materials and techniques. In the Nguyen dynasty, the most used materials in the four seasons decorative arts were wood, red lacquer with gilding. In addition, there are other materials that are quite popular, such as: mosaic, four seasons patterns decorated following each poems represented by a painting on the four seasons themes or eight precious weapons themes, alternating layouts and pages. The decoration stretches on the ridge capping and mopboard of Bieu Duc Temple - Thieu Tri Tomb, or Tu Duc Tomb. The fresco, relief materials were decorated on Hien Nhon gate in the east of the Imperial Citadel, and Chuong Duc gate in the west of the Imperial Citadel. Decorative patterns/ vignette along with flowers, leaves, four seasons, four supernatural creatures and eight weapons have been shown to express the nature of things with closed, definitive, strong lines and adhere to the conventional principles of plastic art. It can be said that the four season decoration is a rich layout that combines many layers of large - small, simple - complex textures with different contents and positions to create its own beauty in general. Patterns such as flowers, leaves, fruits, animals, etc. in the four seasons represent a decorative art style with specific, definitive lines and unique shapes that are also easily recognized in many architectures works of the Nguyen dynasty.

Decorative motifs and popular and common topics in the architectural decorative art, especially in terms of the meaning and symbol of an array or a whole are regularly seen such as: apricot - crane, this is the symbol for the masters who take leisure and seclusion as pleasure, away from fame (taking apricots and cranes as companions)... in addition, it is also meaningful, but the artisans combine the pine tree with the crane, apricot blossom with bird, lotus with duck. According to

the concept of eastern people, the four seasons are symbols of the sufficiency, solidity, eternity, happiness, and are consistent with the four directions, the four highest-ranking court officials in imperial Vietnam, the four virtues, etc. It can be said that the artistic values of the four times symbols are the plastic art values associated with the aesthetic of the royal art in harmony with general principles of architectural decoration of the Nguyen dynasty, containing several symbols which are typical and rich in profound aesthetic - humanity meaning as well as the philosophy of education, quality, lifestyle, cultural behavior etc. still maintain their value to this day.

## 2. SOME TYPICAL FOUR-SEASON STYLES IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY:

Decorative style includes existing forms of a decorative and shaping image that has been stabilized, meets aesthetic "standard" and carries a certain meaning and is recognizable by the convention of decorative shaping, in order to represent a certain image or meaning in human's spiritual-aesthetic activities. Therefore, there are oriental decorative styles that have remained unchanged for several thousand years, such as the two dragons adoring the moon, the leaves turning into dragons, the phoenix holding the collection of poems in his mouth, Apricot- bird, Lotus - duck, Chrysanthemum- Butterfly, Pine tree- crane, three close friends... They are represented by images that reflect spiritual thinking as symbols that have been deeply imprinted in the mind and creative imagination of people. One of the characteristics of that symbol is that it is not separated into arrays, but often diffuses and penetrates each other, forming a symbolic system in which there are relationships and associations from the multidimensionality expression in decorative arts.

### *The style of trees and leaves transforming into dragons:*

Mentioning about transformation in general, people call flowers and leaves transform into dragons, but in the topic of the four seasons, there is a more specific way of calling it by some authors, which is flowers and leaves turning into dragons. The image of trees and leaves turning into dragons in the four-season theme is formed quite diversely, but mainly from four types of trees: apricot, peach, pine, and bamboo tree. The tree leaves and branches are transformed into the image of a dragon presented in several decorations from all over the world with the shape changes in accordance with aesthetic ideals and the meaning of royal expression. Each tree, branch, and leaf must be transformed in order to deeply express the majestic beauty and magical meaning typical of the symbol. When shaping trees, flowers, leaves, and branches, the artists pay attention to the shape of each tree, and stylize or describe exactly each branch, each leaf in general but has the sinuous appearance of dragons and often the rough stumps is a stylized dragon head not only to identify and associate the dragon image, but also emphasize the "transformation" with names such as bamboo tree transforming into dragon, pine tree transforming into dragon, apricot tree transforming into dragon, etc. Typically, at the gate of The To Mieu and Thai To Mieu, the pine tree transforms into a dragon with all the details, partly showing the majesty of a transforming dragon. But artisans are more creative in using seashells to make pine leaves, they are not only suitable for plastic and aesthetics but also creating a new feeling for the image.

### *The style of trees and leaves transforming into phoenix:*

The style of the tree leaves and flowers transforming into phoenix is one of the valuable expression values of decorative art of the four seasons with the style of the phoenix playing with the clouds, the phoenix transforming itself in the clouds, the phoenix the phoenix holding the collection of poems in his mouth etc. in the art of the Nguyen Dynasty. From the practical needs of creativity, the four-season decoration as well as other decorative shaping topics always arise new requirements for material techniques in association with traditional experiences, decorative methods to create impression and visual effects. The phoenix is considered: "...a clean, pure bird... worthy of "comparable" with the dragon in the four supernatural creatures" (Dinh, 2014: 62). Therefore, in the common space, the decoration of the phoenix is quite dense on the roofs and frame ornaments of the works such as Dien Tho Palace, Truong Sanh Palace, Le Thien Anh Tomb, Thanh Cung Tomb, Tu Du Tomb... When the four- season decoration combines with phoenix decorative images on architecture, artisans have to imagine the effects and aesthetic requirements, express the space of the architecture and place the four-season decoration in their appropriate positions and meanings. When carrying out an architectural work, artisans must clearly know the function of the architecture to decorate and set out the main and secondary themes in the four-season theme to adapt, they must choose the appropriate styles. Their understanding, attachment, as well as their behavior towards the plant world are experienced through a very long process. People not only look at plants through their ability to meet material needs but also sympathize, share, discover, personify, and spiritualize into something sacred that cannot be explained. Thereby, plants are stylized into images with different personalities, converging into a rich spiritual world in Vietnamese cultural life.

### *The style of the lotus transforming into a turtle:*

In many panels, frame ornamentation in the four-season decoration, the style of the lotus transforming into a turtle plays a quite common part in the Nguyen dynasty decoration in general and in the theme of the four seasons in particular. Turtle is the only mascot of the four sacred creatures that is a real animal, but thanks to its special properties, it becomes a mascot. The most vivid type is the turtle-lotus type determinant, also known as the style of the lotus transforming into a

turtle. The drooping lotus leaves forms a turtle shell, the head of the turtle from the inside coming out is covered with mortar and colored mosaic frame, making the image reach an interesting connection that is accurate, precise and full of expression. Compared with other materials, fresco, and wood carvings, the image of mosaic has a "vibration" and clearer movement, especially with the characteristics of porcelain material, the turtle images are full of energy, and contain their inner strengths. The motif of lotus transforming into a turtle itself brings a harmonious meaning between folk and royal aesthetics, and through the mosaic material, the folk characteristics are even more evident. However, this type of decoration is not common, they only exist in a few stages, areas and in some special decorative positions. For example, on the four- season frame ornaments of the Trieu To Mieu sanctuary side gate, the images of lotus transforming into a turtle holding sponges in its mouth are made with high block sculptural quality, but they are still constitutive elements of architectural decoration. Sometimes in the four season decoration, the lotus flower and leaf are sometimes a symbol of the universe, the image of the lotus transforming into a turtle in the four seasons and the variations being sacred, making the image in the decoration be richer in the style.

### *The style of apricot and peach blossom-bird:*

The style of apricot and peach blossom - bird reflects the Eastern concept that apricot tree and bird are symbols of spring with joy, fullness, eternal youth and happiness... The style of apricot and peach blossom- bird occupies a fairly popular position in the decoration of the four seasons with familiar patterns containing noble and elegant spiritual values and full of philosophy and spirituality according to the tradition of Confucian philosophy like the Apricot blossom - bird. Like other materials in architectural decoration, the four - season styles are attributed to the frame ornamentation layouts in the cở diêm border, roof curb, cylindrical door corners, and gable roof, but the most prominent ones are: large vertical frame ornamentation at the three gates, different main and second gates in the Nguyen Dynasty's royal architectures and coordinate with the frame ornamentation with "transformation" symbols. On the mosaic four- season set at Hien Nhan gate, the style of "apricot and peach blossom- bird" is well combined with apricot and peach tree and fruits such as peach, pomegranate, Buddha's hand fruit etc. to create a vivid combination for decoration image, it shows the wish of ancients about a peaceful, elegant and cosy life. It is clearly suitable with royal aesthetic which makes expression meaning more plentiful.

Artisan have the ability to transform the original shapes, branches, leaves, sprouts, flowers, fruits in their own way so that it can create associations and visualizations from the viewer's side about a certain animal. Therefore, in terms of these patterns, people often call them the bamboo tree transforming into a dragon, the lotus tree transforming into a turtle, the apricot tree transforming into a phoenix, the pine tree transforming into an unicorn, the orchid transforming into a pheasant etc. In each of those patterns with profound spirituality, as Assoc. Prof. Chu Quang Tru wrote in Hue Fine Arts Culture: "The country's nature which changes in four seasons is carefully observed by artisans, they have thorough knowledge, and select typical ornamental plants and animals to reproduce on wood, stone and precious materials" (Chu, 2000: 40).

### *The style of lotus-duck:*

The style of lotus-duck often appears in the large frame ornaments of the gates and is made of mosaic reliefs, in some places there is also an addition of mural paintings. The lotus represents the purity, because the lotus shaped lamp support has many seeds and it is born in the mud and then emerges to give out fragrance. The duck, often a pair of ducks, symbolizes peace and relaxation. In addition, in the sense of Eastern philosophy, the rising lotus is yang, the duck is yin and also represents wealth, happiness, and peace. The botanical world in the visual arts is always absolutely delicate and highly selective, so all the four-season patterns can only appear from a certain part such as shapes, leaves, flowers, roots, fruits, or roots and the image of lotus-duck is not an exception to that rule.

### *The style of Chrysanthemum-butterfly:*

The style of chrysanthemum-butterfly represents the strength and beauty of nature, happiness of people, chrysanthemum represents the deep and discreet beauty of a woman. With the natural feature that is when the plant dries up, the petals fall, it still keeps the bright yellow color because of water accumulation, so chrysanthemum is also a symbol of loyalty. When combined with the butterfly in the chrysanthemum pattern, it creates new figurative metaphorical properties because the butterfly in the chrysanthemum-butterfly style represents beautiful and vivid life, several good changes. On the other hand, each chrysanthemum-butterfly style can create unique features, sometimes without repetition, with the ups and downs of light, creating unexpected and impressive artistic effects for the whole four- season decoration cluster. The mosaic in the chrysanthemum-butterfly style directly on the mass structures of the gates, screens, roofs, ventilation doors... has created vivid and solemn beauty for architectural works with the intermingling between mosaics of porcelain, shapes and textures of painting, mortar and reliefs. In fact, it is impossible to separate the decorative elements of chrysanthemum style from other contemporary themes in architecture. The array of chrysanthemum- bird style on the upper floor of Chuong Duc, Hien Nhan, The Mieu gate... seem to have the motivation to gather in the images of chrysanthemum-bird hidden in the clouds, the motifs of collection of poems, flowers and leaves transformation in arches and the four- season decorative complexes. The emphasis on chrysanthemum- bird style in each architectural components

always converges, turns into from the guidance of visual elements, hidden under decorative patterns with specific artistic attributes. The image of chrysanthemum-bird style at Duyệt Thi Duong "cổ diêm" is a vivid and clear example of the decoration role in creating an aesthetic volume in architecture, so the decorative clusters of chrysanthemum-bird have become an emphasizing blocks, and contribute to the control of the spiritual and memorial space of the work.

#### ***The Pine tree- deer style:***

The Pine tree- deer style is an expression of strength, symbolizing endurance, immortality and the sense of purposes and uprightness of a gentleman. In the decorative system of the four seasons, these unique expressive features have contributed to the distinctive impressions and styles of expression of the Nguyen Dynasty's fine arts, sometimes different pine tree- deer style arise from being stylized and crystallized some of their patterns. The harmony in the pine tree- deer style is identified on the directly plastic elements on the architectural block.

At Thai Binh Lau, or Bieu Duc Palace, Thieu Tri mausoleum, the efficiency of the pine tree- bird patterns shown in many views and decorative sections has made the aesthetic sense at this location surprisingly vividly changed with the image of a curving and embossing pine tree with expressive and a selectively positioned deer creating a deep emphasis on the human philosophy of life, rich in Eastern humane sentiments in it. What is successful with the pine tree- deer pattern is that they always create a positive impression of the direction of movement in harmony with the overall architectural form.

The value of the pine tree- bird pattern itself does not separate from the expression value in each specific architecture works in the time and space expression full of meaning of their literary philosophy of human survival and aesthetic. In the combinations of the pine tree- bird patterns in the Nguyen dynasty's royal art, there is also a geometry stylization interweaving with decorative patterns. From there, it changes the overall structure of the pine tree- bird pattern such as in Voi Re Palace, Tam Quan and Truong Sanh Palace screen, the ancient building of Hon Chen Palace.

Due to the strict regulations of the pine tree- bird, it is always necessary to consider and behave in accordance with the principles, contents and expression forms of the architecture of mausoleums, temples, castles and palaces to form different judgments, technical and artistic treatments. This shows that right from the selection of decorative shaping materials, it is necessary to pay attention to the requirements of decorative coordination that they must adapt.

#### ***The Willow- horse style:***

The willow- horse style with willow branches is associated with the image of Guan Yin holding a gourd in one hand and waving a willow branch in the other hand gives the people the water of eternal life and peace. The willow in Eastern spiritual legends is supple, soft, and represents femininity. The willow is only suitable for autumn and has an evil banishment characteristic. The horse is an animal that represents agility, strength and is an animal associated with the image of a gentleman and magnanimity. When combining willow and horse to create a willow- horse pattern, it is implied to praise the will and strength of the owner who knows how to overcome all obstacles and disasters, repel the miasma to rise.

Through the willow- horse style in the Nguyen Dynasty royal fine arts, it shows that they made an important contribution to the expression of artistic concept and aesthetic tastes of the dynasty. At the false pillars of the three-arched-entrances gate of Truong Sanh Palace, the decoration of willow-horse themes on the frame ornaments make the changes of emotions of the block with harmony and elegance but must comply with the regulations of architectural structure. Different from the decoration plastic cluster of willow- horse in Thai Binh Lau, decorated at the Chuong Duc gate for women in the palace to go in and out at the Citadel, there are new plastic features and expressions. Here, the tones, colors and lines of the willow-horse style decoration are presented to another space that is more symbolic than a specific expression, with the images of willow- horse patterns which is rich in themes, styles but is also very close and elegant through dense frame ornamentation decoration. In that space, willow-horse-style decoration plays a decisive role in the work of locating the quality, function and location of the work in the Nguyen Dynasty architectural populations.

#### ***The Bamboo- mouse style:***

Notably, first of all, the decorative images are rare and seem to be found only in the decoration of Van Van and Thanh Cung mausoleum, which is the image of the Bamboo – mouse style. The bamboo tree with straight tubes, white flesh, green throughout the year despite storms and winds becomes a symbol of immortality, uprightness and purity of the gentleman. Bamboo is also the tree of earthly life, representing wisdom and endurance with life. In Chinese culture, the mouse is also a symbol of honesty, altruism, progress, and generosity. The image of a mouse crawling through a bamboo cylinder on a stone-carved frame ornaments at Van Van mausoleum is an independent decoration like an ancient Chinese painting. The image of mice crawling through bamboo cylinder in the Eastern culture is also a wish for good harvest and wealth.

When the harvest season and New Year comes, hearing the sound of a mouse is a good fortune and comfortableness. The mouse that gets into the bamboo cylinder is a symbol of richness, warmth, and the noble, bright, and chivalrous spirit of a

gentleman. On the other hand, the image of the mouse is not only related to the fairy tale about the flood, it foretells people and saves themselves, but it is also associated with human life in the wet rice civilization in a normal and close way. In addition to the bamboo- mouse – pattern stone- carvings decorative images on the grave of Van Van mausoleum, we also come across very unique images and themes in some other materials such as fresco, reliefs, and we create images that have strange "openness", full of poetry of the engraving decoration art of the Nguyen dynasty. The four-season theme have several vivid styles, different names and symbolic meanings, among which are symbols full of Confucian humanity quality, and the bamboo- mouse pattern is one of the vivid examples.

#### ***The banana tree- elephant style:***

The variations of the banana tree – elephant style in decoration has always been one of the rather sensitive attributes of decorative art of the Nguyen Dynasty with the multi-material and effective combination of different plastic decorative methods. The banana tree – elephant style has become one of the unique and rare values of decorative art of the Nguyen Dynasty, because it does not expand on the symbolic representations in decoration even though it has made the decorated spatial structures more vivid. At Tien Cung Tomb (Van Van), there appear two elephants beside a banana bush carved with stones on the corner of the grave, reminding us of the imprint of Indian culture in Vietnamese culture, elephant images in Champa sculpture and is probably very close to the elephant - banana image in Buddhist paintings. The vividness and accurate ad impressive expression of the elephant - banana pattern have made the image of the mausoleum here, although murky and mysterious, still close, warm and full of natural vitality.

#### ***The peony-golden rooster style:***

The peony-golden rooster pattern is embossed with mosaics or stone-carved in the four season frame ornaments in the style of multi-layer reliefs, expressing both the inside and the outside of the gate. The peony is a symbol of wealth, happiness, and a noble woman. The rooster with the symbol for the five virtues is explained in great detail in the Oriental decorative image: Benevolence - Righteousness – Propriety – Wisdom- Trustworthiness. The peony- golden rooster style also has a profound meaning of the "couple" with the suitable alliance and a happy and fulfilling life. This is clearly seen on the side entrance of The To Temple with the image and pattern of peony - golden rooster identified from the main entrance of Buu Thanh with the main image of a rooster and a series of decorative frame ornaments following the theme of flowers, leaves, eight weapons and other four-season images. The images of the peony- golden rooster pattern are arranged quite vividly, with a bit of soaring by the change of direction of the auxiliary floral motifs. It is the sub-pictures depicting the small earthen mound or crouch of orchids that have created a emotional poetic inspiration but equally delicate in the art of creating the peony- golden rooster pattern of the Nguyen Dynasty.

#### ***The peony-pheasant style:***

Among the forms of plastic expression of the peony - pheasant in the architecture of the graves of the Nguyen Dynasty queens' mausoleums, the most prominent ones are the plastic decoration on the frame ornamentation of the Tu Du, Thanh Cung and Tien Cung tombs with very elegant and lyrical lines. The decoration of peony - pheasant creates many aesthetic symmetry and spatial impressions, plastic effects in the architecture of the Nguyen Dynasty. The architecture of the Nguyen Dynasty had changes in material structure and expression, frame ornaments with the creative rhythm movement of the "double roof, duplex house" architectural structure with a level of embossment or mosaic balancing the range of eyes and in straight lines, it exists a concise, tight, powerful beauty of interwoven peonies - pheasants. Depending on the specific location of the work, the peony-pheasant decoration is always attached, creating a lively rhythm for the work. The art of decoration of eight weapons in Thai Binh Lau is similar, with a several of decorative highlights of peonies and pheasants that have reflected and expressed one of the appearances and artistic values of the Nguyen Dynasty royal architecture, creating a unique feature of the art style of this period.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

It can be said that the artistic values of the four seasons symbols are the visual values associated with the aesthetic of the royal art, in harmony with the general principles of architectural decoration of the Nguyen Dynasty, containing several typical symbols, rich in aesthetic meaning - profound humanity as well as the philosophy of quality, lifestyle, cultural behavior education ect. still keep their values to this day.

The unique pattern values related to the four-season theme in Nguyen's fine art in Hue are very meaningful in research, study and teaching about the history - culture of the land which possesses many cultural heritage world honored by the Unesco.

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